

Walking Prescriptions for Health

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Walking can help your blood pressure, sleep patterns, mood and more.

A walk is a proven way to treat a host of ailments, but not everyone should take the same path. Here's what the experts recommend:

High blood pressure: 25-35 minutes; moderate pace

How walking helps: It can lower blood pressure, according to a 2010 review of 27 trials on the topic. A 2016 report by the National Heart, Lung and Blood Institute found that walking reduces your risk for coronary artery disease.

Walking Rx: Shoot for at least 1.75 miles at 3 to 4.5 mph most days of the week to lower blood pressure and cholesterol, says Paul T. Williams, a life sciences researcher at the Lawrence Berkeley National Laboratory in Berkeley, Calif.

Arthritis: 5-30 minutes; leisurely pace

How walking helps: It strengthens the muscles that support joints, helps you shed pounds and reduces joint stiffness. In a 2015 review of 54 studies, researchers concluded that walking, like other exercise, was as effective as nonsteroidal anti-inflammatory drugs for pain relief.

Walking Rx: Leigh F. Callahan, associate director of the Thurston Arthritis Research Center at the University of North Carolina, Chapel Hill, recommends starting with five minutes of walking and building up to 30 total minutes per day — at once or in separate walks — for five days per week. If the pain is worse two hours after the walk than it was before the walk started, take a less intense walk the next time.

Osteoporosis: 30 minutes; leisurely pace

How walking helps: Walking helps preserve bone.

Walking Rx: Try to walk 30 minutes a day, five days a week. “Three 10-minute walks a day are as bone-strengthening as one 30-minute walk,” says Andrea J. Singer, M.D., of the National Osteoporosis Foundation.

Depression: 20-30 minutes; varied pace

How walking fast helps: It increases the production of serotonin, dopamine and other brain chemicals that lift your mood, says John B. Arden, author of *The Brain Bible*.

Walking Rx: Start with 10 minutes of strolling, then walk briskly to 75 percent of your maximum effort — a pace that makes talking difficult. Keep that up for two or three minutes, then resume a strolling pace. Repeat these intervals for 20 to 30 minutes.

Insomnia: 15+ minutes; relaxed pace

How walking helps: Morning walks expose your body to essential early daylight. “Bright light inhibits the body’s secretion of melatonin, our natural sleep agent. When you block melatonin in the morning by walking outside, it then bounces back later in the day, helping to promote sleep,” says Donald W. Greenblatt, M.D., director of the Medicine Sleep Center at the University of Rochester in New York. Late-afternoon walks can also help, as we sleep best when our bodies are in cooldown mode.

Walking Rx: In the morning or the late afternoon, aim for a 15- to 30-minute walk. It’s best if you can walk daily. Walk at a comfortable pace, and finish your walk at least three hours before bedtime. Be patient: Some evidence suggests that it can take a couple of weeks to get the full sleep benefit of exercise, so don’t be disappointed if you are not experiencing an immediate effect, Greenblatt says.

Type 2 Diabetes: 45 minutes; relaxed pace

How walking helps: It provides better blood sugar control, especially as we get older and become more resistant to insulin. The benefits are immediate, says Robert Gabbay, M.D., chief medical officer at the Joslin Diabetes Center in Boston. Walking after eating sweets can prevent a blood sugar spike.

Walking Rx: Walk for 15 minutes at an easy pace (about 3 mph or so) about a half-hour after breakfast, lunch and dinner. Research shows that short post-meal walks, three times a day, were as effective as one 45-minute walk in improving blood sugar control over 24 hours. If you've been sedentary and haven't walked for a while, start out with a five- or 10-minute walk after each meal. Because people with diabetes can develop foot infections due to reduced blood flow to the feet, it's important to get properly fitted for walking shoes. Your podiatrist can help.

Sara Altshul has written on health for over 25 years for AARP, Prevention, Reader's Digest and many other magazines.